On the Anniversary of my Bar Mitzvah

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Forty-two years ago this week — according to the Jewish calendar — a little kid in a navy-blue blazer and tan slacks was called to the Torah for the first time.

His name was Daniel Moskovitz — though everyone called him Danny.

It was his Bar Mitzvah.

And courtesy of his mother, who saved a copy of everything, here's some of what that kid said to the congregation that night.

“I want to welcome everyone here for this important evening in my life. I am so glad that you were all able to come here to be with me. Some of our family traveled from far away to share this moment. Thank you for coming.”

Young Danny went on to thank his parents and siblings for their help and support.

He thanked his grandparents — Grandma, Papa, and Nana — and made sure to mention all the cooking they did for the oneg.

He thanked the rabbi and the cantor — and even joked that Cantor Reich told so many jokes during tutoring it was amazing he learned anything at all. Then he explained the biblical origin of his Hebrew name, Daniel, meaning “God is my judge.”

He told the congregation how Daniel was thrown into the lions’ den for practicing Judaism — and yet his faith protected him.

And then, standing there at thirteen, he announced: “Daniel was brave! He wouldn’t give in on his religion. He stayed true to God. As a Bar Mitzvah, I feel that I should be among those who hold firm. The

teachings that I have received, I feel, are great teachings, and I hope to live by them throughout my life. It is possible to learn about Judaism but not live according to what Judaism requires. But I hope that I use the teachings I have received for my benefit and also for the benefit of everyone around me. As Daniel believed in the one God, so do I. On this important day of my life I proudly proclaim — Shema Yisrael, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One!”

Even then, young Daniel had a flair for the dramatic. No one knew then — least of all me — that the bar mitzvah boy in the blazer would one day become a rabbi.

If you'd asked me back then, I'd have told you without hesitation that I was going to be the third baseman for the San Francisco Giants.

And yet here I stand — forty-two years later, almost to the day.

This week's Torah portion — the one our B'nai Mitzvah Ethan will read tomorrow morning — is the very same story of Noah that I read on that day. And in looking for a message to share tonight, I can find no better one than the words I gave at thirteen: "It is possible to learn about Judaism and not live according to what Judaism requires. But I hope and

pray that we use the teachings of Judaism for our benefit and the benefit of those around us."

It's a simple message — born of a child's sincerity. But in its simplicity, it's also poignant… and maybe even a little profound.

There are many ways we identify as Jews — from bloodline to bagels, from shul to Seinfeld.
But forty-two years later, I'm more convinced than ever that to be Jewish, you have to do Jewish.
And I don't just mean synagogue and prayer.
Even as a rabbi, I'll admit — those are only one measure of yiddishkeit.

If they ever make a book of Rabbi Dan sayings — and it would probably be a trifold pamphlet — I hope they include this one:

“It’s not about how often you show up in synagogue — it’s about how often synagogue shows up in you.”

This week’s portion is about building.

Noah didn’t pray for the flood to stop.

He built something.

He built an ark — plank by plank — while everyone else laughed.

He didn’t know if it would work.

He just kept building.

That’s what it means to live Judaism.

We’re not asked to save the world with miracles — we’re asked to build something solid and kind within it.

An ark of compassion.

A family of love.

A community that shelters others from the floodwaters of fear and loneliness.

Every mitzvah, every act of decency, every hour you give — that’s another plank in the ark.

When I was thirteen, I said, “As Daniel believed in the one God, so do I.”

What I didn’t yet understand was that belief alone is never enough.

Noah believed — but then he got to work.

Faith, in Judaism, isn’t a feeling.

It’s an action.

It’s the courage to start building while the sky is still blue.

To care before the crisis.

To hope when hope seems naïve.

We live in a time when the floodwaters feel high — the flood of hatred, of fear, of disconnection.

The question for us is:

Are we building — or are we drifting?

Are we inviting others onto the ark — or closing the door behind us?

To do Jewish in this moment means showing up.

Showing up with decency in a coarse world.

With empathy in a cruel world.

With wisdom in a confused world.

It means letting our tradition’s best values guide us — in our homes, our relationships, our politics, our philanthropy.

And if the answer feels uncertain — if your inner ark still feels unfinished — then the invitation is open.

Come study.

Come learn.

Come build.

Judaism is a 3,500-year-old blueprint for human dignity and purpose.

And every generation gets to add its own craftsmanship.

Forty-two years after that little boy in the blue blazer said Shema Yisrael, I’m still trying to live up to his words —

to use the teachings of Judaism for my benefit and the benefit of everyone around me.

So tonight, may we each take up our hammer again.
May we build arks of compassion and courage, of learning and laughter.

May synagogue not only show up in us — but through us —
in how we love, how we give, how we speak truth, how we build.
And when the floodwaters rise — as they always do —
may we find one another inside…
safe,
singing,
and still building.